Constructing a Fairy Tale: the identification of an ‘Intercultural’ Couple on Chinese Television

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1. Introduction

Even though it might sound counterintuitive to say that there is a “typical” intercultural couple (Philippe, 2008: 117), intercultural couplehood is often viewed and represented as two national cultures “interacting”, “clashing”, “hyphenating”… Just like other kinds of intercultural relations, this differentialist-essentialist understanding is likely to be shared by “global common sense” (Piller, 2007; Dervin, 2011). It seems to be also largely the case in the academia (Dervin, 2011). Contrary to the current flow of anti-essentialism and anti-culturalism (e.g. Holliday 2010), the majority of studies on intercultural couplehood continues to ignore the fact that identities are co-constructed, co-enacted and co-expressed by people – instead of cultures (Piller, 2002: 183; Dryden, 1999: 16).

This paper represents both a criticism of “canonical” research on intercultural couplehood and a plea for change in the way couples are studied. In order to do so, we first need to spend some time examining critically the two central concepts of this conference: interculturality and identity. In terms of research methodology, we have opted for a different approach. Studies on intercultural couples have often relied on interviews and/or questionnaires. Our study looks at media construction of the story of an intercultural couple which was widely reported by Chinese media.

2. Identity and interculturality: two ‘tired’ concepts for studying ‘intercultural’ couplehood?

The ‘tired’ concepts of identity and interculturality are often presented as being interrelated. Like many other concepts in the human and social sciences, they are both given many and varied definitions, which has an impact on the way they are used by researchers. It is thus necessary to position our own understanding before moving on.

For many decades (but it is still true in some sense today), both concepts were seen as determining what people said, did, thought, etc. Since the birth of Modernity in 18th Century Europe and the acceleration of globalization (Pieterse, 2004), the “imagined communities” that constitute nations-states have created “boundaries” between “cultures” (often national) and “identities” (national identities) (Brubaker, 2004: 66). Pieterse (2001: 224) even asserts that this has led to a strong “boundary fetishism” in international politics, everyday discourses on the ‘Other’ (tourism) and

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1 Name of the show: 《乡约》, we translated it in English as “Country Date”. It was first launched on CCTV-7 (China Central Television – Channel 7, which focuses on military and agriculture) in January 2011.
even in research worlds. “Culture” and “identity” thus have a role to play in this differentialist view of the world and people. Briedenbach & Nyíri (2009: 9) share the opinion that today “culture – or rather, cultural difference – is now held to be the main explanation for the way the human world functions”.

The field of anthropology, the study of Man, has had a leading role to play in creating these cultural boundaries. Tommy Dahlen tells us that the anthropological approach entitled Parsonian structural functionalism (1997: 159) has contributed for example to “viewing culture as a stable value system, governing human action and manifested in social institutions such as family, corporations and government”.

Criticism of the concept of culture (cf. Wikan, 2002; Abu-Lughod, 1991) constitutes an important step in reviewing the way we conceptualise interculturality and identity. In her 2010 book, Anne Philips emphasises the fact that “culture is the catch-all explanation for everything” (ibid.: 63). The concept often presents uncritical, solid, static and “pathologizing” (Briendebach & Nyíri, 2009: 322) visions of people by being “agentized” (cultures meet, cultures clash…) and places hierarchy rather than variation between people (Philips, 2010: 5). Philips also asserts that “in popular usages of the term, there is a tendency to call on culture when faced with something we cannot otherwise understand” (2010: 65). Gerd Baumann (1996: 4) has demonstrated how the phrases “in my culture we do” or “in our culture we don’t” are used strategically by people to explain their behaviours or thoughts (cf. also A.-Pretceille, 2003). Politically this has led to what Philips (2010: 86) calls “cultural defence” where cultural traditions are used to e.g. legitimize crimes.

For Bayart (2002: 74), such understanding of culture – often termed culturalism – commits three errors: it believes that culture is a corpus of timeless and stable representations; boundaries between cultures are clear-cut; culture is endorsed by coherent political orientations. As such what is represented as a cultural practice then “misrepresents what is frequently a contested activity as if it were slavishly followed by all those associated with particular cultural groups” (Philips, 2010: 5). There is today a consensus on the fact that there is great “internal diversity” in all societies beyond so-called multiculturalism (i.e. foreigners, Dahlen, 1997: 174): amongst others, social codes are contested, power relationships altered (Bhatia, Date: 61); people live in “a web of cultural references and meanings” (Philips, 2010: 61) and are urged to “continuously reconstitut(e) themselves into new selves in response to internal and external stimuli” (Ewing, 1990: 258).

For anthropologists and many other representatives of the human and social sciences, the criticism of the concept of culture is widely accepted. According to Ewing, 1990: 262 (cf. also Chauvier, 2011), anthropology is now interested in “inconsistencies” and pays more attention to the “experiencing actor” rather than a static subjectivity-less cultural representative. This is precisely the path we are following in this study.

The criticism of the concept of culture and the proposals put forward by anthropologists, amongst others, is of interest and importance for fields involved in researching interculturality such as intercultural communication, education, business studies and applied linguistics. If interculturality is about people from different
countries meeting, and if the concept of culture is losing its credibility to analyse such a situation, what options do we have left? Many researchers involved with intercultural communication and education worldwide have actually jumped on the critical bandwagon of culture (Abdallah-Pretceille, 1986, 2003; Dervin, 2008; Holliday, 2010; Piller, 2011) in a coherent manner. For them, interculturality is more about constructing a relationship through negotiating images of the self and the other, cultures, languages, etc. rather than using these elements as explanatory static elements.

Ingrid Piller has been a defendant of this approach for quite a while now. She wrote in 2000 (21): “Just as research on language and gender has moved away from a focus on difference ("women’s language vs. men’s language") to an interest in the social construction of a gendered identity (…), I am suggesting that a social construction approach would also offer new insights in the field of intercultural communication. Instead of asking how Germans and Americans, for instance, use different communication styles, it might be much more useful to ask how cultural and national identity is ‘done,’ i.e. how it is constructed in ongoing interactions”.

Piller’s research on intercultural couplehood is one of the rare studies which takes this approach seriously (2002, 2007). Dervin’s research on the impact of lingua franca use on the identification of binational couples in Finland and Hong Kong are also such exceptions (2012). Both researchers thus move away from culture as an explanatory fact to explore the construction of the couple’s identity in research interviews or focus groups. For Zygmunt Bauman (2004: 17), identity “is the ‘loudest talk in town’, the burning issue on everybody’s mind and tongue”. The concept is actually one of the most used and abused terms in research on intercultural couplehood in the sense that there doesn’t seem to be a consensus on how it is conceptualized and researched. Just like culture, there is a very strong urge in most fields to reject essentialist and solid approaches to identity. Identity does not exist as such but is an interactive and unstable creation (cf. Piller’s comment supra). Of course we need to bear in mind that this does not occur in a “free-floating” manner where “anything goes” (Bauman, 2004) but in a sort of “pull-push” approach. This is why the concept of identification, reflecting co-construction and interaction, has been suggested to go “beyond identity” (Cooper & Brubaker, 2000), especially when the latter is related to static forms of culturalism and essentialism (cf. Brubaker, 2004; Gillespie & Cornish, 2009; Howarth, 2002 : 17). The presence of an other does contribute to constructing, expressing and enacting identities. For Laing (1961: 86) “A person’s own ‘identity’ cannot be completely abstracted from his identity-for-others. His identity-for-himself; the identity others ascribe to him; the identities he ascribes to them; the identity or identities he thinks they attribute to him; what he thinks they think he thinks they think…”. This means that in the show that we are analysing – as in any act of interaction – identities will be put on scene, will be created by a complex web of actors (the host, the couple, their children, the live audience, the audience at home, etc.) and that it won’t reflect a single and solid “cultural” reality (e.g. the partners’ countries and/or “cultures”, China/Armenia). Yet co-constructing doesn’t mean that what is happening is “respectful” of the image(s) that people want to
As A. Sen (2006: 31) puts it: “the freedom in choosing our identity in the eyes of others can sometimes be extraordinarily limited”. Therefore we need to bear in mind that what is presented in interaction to *identify* may be strategies to define, delimit and thus construct an image of the self. It is clear, as Gerd Baumann has shown that cultures often serve this purpose (cf. supra).

The “intercultural” is often considered through the facet of cultural differences in research on intercultural couples. In psychological and sociological approaches, cultural identity is placed in the centre of analysis. Waldman & Rubalcava (2005: 236), for instance, explain in clearly culturalist and thus essentialist words that “The mutual provision of affect attunement becomes more problematic and difficult in intercultural marriages because culture plays such a significant role in the construction of emotion”. The two researchers even assert that in the case of Sino-French couples, Chinese people being collectivistic and the French more individualistic, cultural problems between “representatives” of these “cultures” are bound to occur. Some researchers (Falicov, 1995; Piller, 2002; Varro, 2003; Dervin, 2010) go as far to assert that the classical division between “inter-” and “intra-” cultural couples is superficial as any couple experiences differences and similarities often beyond nationality and languages.

3. About the data

“Country Date” is a television program broadcasted on a Chinese channel – Military and Agriculture of CCTV – which focuses on rural China. Usually, the program introduces local people in small towns or villages where they record the show.

The show “the Foreign Wife in Our Village” is one episode of this program that was first broadcasted on 30 January 2011. During 38 minutes, it introduces the story of an intercultural couple: Deng Zhonggang and his wife Nunè. Deng is a farmer from Shidao, Rongcheng City, Shandong Province of North China. He met an Armenian nurse Nunè when he was working in Armenia, fell in love with her during the medical treatment, married her there and then brought her back to his village. They became the first intercultural couple in the village.

Though the village life used to be extremely new to Nunè, who’s grown up in a rich urban family and thus, has experienced a lot of inconveniences during the years, the Dens still get along well with each other in their 15-year marriage. They have twin daughters and Nunè has got very much used to the life in China. In the program, they are shown as a good example of a happy intercultural couple. In fact they are often interviewed and reported by the media, and have become well-known figures in the country. The show mainly introduces how the couple met each other and their life in Shidao.

Based on a transcription of the analyzed show, during which the couple was interviewed, we are interested in how the Dens are presented and co-constructed through different perspectives (themselves, the host, the audience and in terms of language use). We are especially interested in if and how differences – cultural, ethnic, linguistics, individual… – are used by the participants to enact the couple’s
identification. The proposed research method analyses how the couple’s identification is expressed, constructed and enacted in a television show. In order to do so, a dynamic ‘liquid’ approach to discourse analysis, through the principles of dialogism (Gillespie, 2006) and utterance theory (Marnette, 2005), will serve the purpose of examining this phenomenon by identifying the voices and the related discursive strategies that contribute to create and ‘imagine’ the couple (for full methodological considerations, cf. Dervin, 2011).

The analysis is divided into three sections: 1. Building up an intercultural ‘fairy tale’ (macro-analysis), 2. Multifaceted differentialization, and 3. Unstable identification.

4. Building up an intercultural ‘fairy tale’?

4.1. Macro-analysis of the show

As any other media production, it is important to offer first of all a macro-analysis of how the show is constructed and, most importantly, how it builds up the image(s) of the couple under examination (van Dijk, 2006; van Leeuwen, 2008). According to Livingstone & Lunt (2001: 59), many TV shows contribute to build up fairy tales around ordinary people “with whom we may identify and whose achievements we may delight in” (ibid.: 60). This is clearly the case in the show under scrutiny.

The show is structured into 3 preview sections, 10 documentary-type videos and 12 sections entitled:

1. What kind of partner would you expect? (Duration: 1 min 40 sec)
2. How the foreign wife selected her spouse? (3 min 10 sec)
3. The 1000-mile romance (3 min),
4. The “conquest” of the foreign mother-in-law (1 min 45 sec),
5. The next generation of the “East-West” cooperation (2 min 30 sec),
6. Foreign daughter-in-law came to the village (4 min 25 sec),
7. Chinese wife (2 min 35 sec),
8. Then came the foreign mother-in-law (3 min 05 sec),
9. I should do something (2 min 30 sec),
10. The kissing incident (4 min 05 sec),
11. The foreign wife went to town (2 min),

The 12 sections represent the archetype of a chronological narrative (Labov, 1997) with a general introduction (the topic of intercultural couplehood is posed in general terms to the audience at the beginning: what kind of partner would you expect?); the story of their encounter (an orientation clause in Labov’s model of narrative clauses); her moving to China, the couple’s “thousand-mile journey”, the problems she faced with her in-laws (the complicating action(s), Labov, ibid.); the couple’s twin daughters (the emphasis of the “East” and the “West” in the title “The next generation
of the ‘East-West’ Cooperation’); a description of her strange behaviors; and a happy ending or a coda, i.e. “a final clause which returns the narrative to the time of speaking, precluding a potential question “and what happened?” (Labov, 1997) (A Chinese-foreign wife, cf. Day after day she endured till one day a Chinese wife she became). The wife also explains during the show that she had decided to start her own business and opened a café in the hometown of Confucius and Menius, which contributes to the mythological tone of the story. Finally the repetition of the phrase “I’ve heard that” by the show presenter emphasizes the sort of legendary picture of the story and links the discourses on the couple to the doxa (common sense).

It is also interesting that each section is introduced by a question which allows the program to build up excitement, e.g. before section 2, and after having explained how people select their spouses in China, the following indirect question is posed: “before we see whether Nune fits all these requirements or not…” or before section 4: “if he wanted to marry you, he had to get your parents’ permission first, didn’t he?”. The conclusion of the show (‘coda’) demonstrates clearly that a fairy tale has just occurred before the viewers’ eyes:

An honest Chinese farmer, who works in the fields, married a blonde young wife and has a lovely twin with her. How many Chinese men would be jealous of Lao Deng! Well, since Lao Deng is extraordinary! Rongcheng is a good place, so is Shidao; otherwise there wouldn’t be living such an extraordinary Lao Deng. An international marriage, a well-known love story, a refraction of the huge changes of Chinese countries.

Narratives: typical rites of passage for intercultural couples?

Four types of characters are introduced in the show: the foreign wife, the ‘local’ husband, their children and the in-laws (especially the mother-in-laws who seem to play the stereotypical roles of the wicked mothers).

We are told at the beginning that the wife “was born in a rich family in Armenia who enjoyed life with fine food, wine and cars”, which contrasts “nicely” with the fact that she moved to Chinese countryside. The husband, “a village young man”, comes across as some sort of a hero: “encouraged by Deng Xiaoping’s “South Tour” remarks, Lao Deng took this opportunity and went abroad! (...)”.

In what follows, we have decided to concentrate on four significative ‘narratives’ around which the show revolves to analyze how the story of the couple is constructed.

The first encounter (orientation)

This first sequence is an orientation clause, which “gives information on the time, place of the events of a narrative, the identities of the participants and their initial behavior” (Labov, 1997: 5). Though their encounter in Armenia is not exceptional (she was a nurse, he was a patient), the presenter tries to turn it into some
sort of fairy tale at the beginning of the show. The same story is actually told from the perspectives of both main protagonists: first the wife and then the husband.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Wife’s account</th>
<th>Husband’s account</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>H: … Well, tell me where you two met each other.</td>
<td>H: When did you first meet Nunè?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N: We met each other in Armenia.</td>
<td>D: 1995, in 1995 when I was sick for the first time.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>H: What were you doing back then?</td>
<td>H: Please describe what she was like.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N: I was a nurse.</td>
<td>D: I couldn’t find another girl who was such beautiful in Shidao.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>H: What did he do?</td>
<td>H: I’ve heard that Nunè kissed you first back then?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N: He worked in Armenia.</td>
<td>D: It is true. It was September, and quite cold. That day was my friend’s birthday, so I wanted to invite Nunè (to the party). I’d been waiting outside for more than two hours without wearing much. When she finally arrived and saw me shaking in the coldness, she hugged me, kissed me, and said to me: “Darling, I’m marrying you.”</td>
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<tr>
<td>H: Then how did you know each other?</td>
<td>H: Was it all? Then she married you?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N: He was alone without anyone who could take care of him; I gave him injections and looked after him.</td>
<td>D: Yes, simple.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>H: So you got to know him when you were giving him treatment?</td>
<td>H: Gentlemen please listen to me now: for those who are still single, if you want to win a beauty, you've got to wear little! (To Deng) What did you wear at that moment?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N: Yes.</td>
<td>(To Deng) What did you wear at that moment?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>H: How many needles did you give him?</td>
<td>D: One shirt.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N: SO many.</td>
<td>H: What was the temperature?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>H: One closer step with on needle, one more step with another needle; finally a romance has also been injected by needles!</td>
<td>D: About zero (centigrade) degree.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N: (We) became a couple (in the end)!</td>
<td>H: You’d been standing more than two hours?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>H: Did you understand Chinese back then?</td>
<td>D: Yes.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N: No.</td>
<td>H: (To Nunè) Then what he looked like when you saw him?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>H: Did he know how to speak your local language?</td>
<td>N: Like a popsicle. (He tasted) so sweet when I kissed him.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N: Yes.</td>
<td>H: Where did you kiss him?</td>
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<tr>
<td>H: Do you still remember the first words he told you?</td>
<td>N: Face, lips.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N: He told me that he liked me very much.</td>
<td>H: Do you still want to kiss him now?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>H: Oh, is it so that first you met each other, and without giving him any injection, he just told you: “Nurse, I like you!”?</td>
<td>N: Yes.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N: No, no.</td>
<td>H: Still want to?</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>N: Yes.</td>
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</table>
In the wife’s version of their first encounter, the husband was working in Armenia and “was alone without anyone who could take care of him” (the lonely stranger), and then the wife, who was a nurse, “gave him injections and looked after him”. After “so many” needles, they “became a couple in the end”. The way the wife told the story was rather plain, but the presenter continued to turn their encounter into a fairy tale in which the needles injected not only medicine but love: “One closer step with one needle, one more step with another needle; finally a romance has also been injected by needles!”. The symbol of the needle is reminiscent of the spinning, weaving and sewing in the Grimm brothers’ tales and has evidently magical orientation (Bottigheimer, 1982).

When the husband told the story, the emphasis was not on their first encounter, but their first kiss. By asking the husband to “describe what she was like”, the presenter intended to suggest the different look of the foreign wife. Then the focus was moved to the couple’s first kiss, and the story was turned into a “legend” again. The husband “was wearing one shirt” in “about zero (centigrade) degree” outdoor “standing” and “waiting” for the wife for “more than two hours”. In the end, when the wife “finally arrived and saw him shaking in the coldness”, the husband became a “popsicle”. She hugged him and kissed him. The story of how the couple got married was shortened into three steps – like the husband said with pride that it is “simple” – the wife “saw him frozen like a popsicle, then kissed him, after that married him”. Ironically, the presenter told the audience – like a guide of how to “win a beauty” – “Gentlemen please listen to me now: for those who are still single, if you want to win a beauty, you’ve got to wear little!”.

In the two different versions of the couple’s story, the husband was made to be a “hero” who “won a beauty” by needles and being “frozen like a popsicle” outside; and the wife, clearly from the description, simply fell in love with him.

**Getting permission to get married**

The husband gets to be the “hero” again when the story of how he tried to get permission from his in-laws to marry his wife is told:

H: How did he achieve that?
N: The first time he came to our house, he made Chinese food for my mother …
He made dumplings, too…

H: Did your parents know that you two were dating? … Did they agree on this?
N: No, they didn’t… Marriages between Chinese and Armenians were like…

None at all! I was the first one.

The presenter set such a tone at the beginning of this section by asking the wife how the husband “achieved” that, which suggested that this marriage was the feat of the husband who has made extreme efforts.

However, the stereotype that the wife delivers on Armenian men in what follows seemed to work in the husband’s favour:

H: They (parents’ attitudes) were changed after having dumplings?
N: Armenian men they don’t enter kitchens, they don’t do such (house) works.
H: And kitchen was the first place he (Lao Deng) entered once he came to your house.
N: Then my parents, like, had very good impression of him. They said that if they have such a son-in-law… (they) could have delicious food everyday.
H: In the end, your parents agreed on your marriage because of this dumpling-dinner?
N: Yes.

To the wife’s family, “Armenian men they don’t enter kitchens, they don’t do such (house) works”; on the contrary, the husband showed up as a family-oriented man who “entered the kitchen” immediately and was a good cook. In the end, the “dumpling-dinner” has changed the attitude of the wife’s parents just like that, and the husband had moved one step forward on “winning the beauty”.

H: Had you and your parents tried dumplings before?
N: No, no…
H: How did you eat the dumplings?
N: We used forks, (since) we didn’t know how to use chopsticks…

The dumpling dinner serves a very precise purpose in the construction of the show: it is a complicating action (Labov, 1997) which emphasises the differences of the two parties. Dumplings and chopsticks were used as representatives of the husband/China, and forks and knives were used as those of the wife’s family/foreign. Hence, the dumpling-dinner was used to present a meeting or a clash of the two “cultures” that are with clear-cut boundaries here (Bayart, 2002: 74).

The wife’s arrival

The wife was a total stranger in the village when she arrived:

H: Did you know how to speak Chinese when you came here?
N: No, I didn’t understand a thing…
H: When you just came to the village, you slept on a “kang”, right? What’s the difference between a “kang” and a bed?
N: It (kang) was so hard that you felt something was pressing against you.
H: Did you sleep well?
N: No…
H: *I’ve heard* that when you just arrived here, you didn’t know how to switch off the light in the night? … you didn’t get used to the toilet at all when you just came, did you? … About shopping in the village, is it convenient? … How did you go out in Armenia?

Differentialism is emphasized here: She looked “funny” since she “didn’t understand Chinese”, didn’t sleep well on a “kang”, didn’t know how to switch off the light, and didn’t get use to the outdoor toilet. By asking comparative questions like “*what’s the difference between …*” and “How … in Armenia and how … in the village here?”, the presenter has emphasized the wife’s image as a stranger in the village. Meanwhile, to the wife the village was also a strange place through the comparison of “Armenia” and “the village here”, “kang” and “bed”, “normal” toilet and “outdoor toilet with flies”, “supermarket” and “farmer’s market”, as well as “go out by car” and “by tractor”. It is interesting here that differentialism is not so much about China but about the dichotomy city/countryside.

The clash between the new wife and the village used to be extremely strong when she firstly arrived, but nowadays, she has already got used to the life in the village – the presenter used a smart suggesting way to tell the audience that the wife has become one of the villagers. As eating green Chinese onion with salty sauce is presented as a common habit of the ‘locals’, the presenter uses it as a symbol of the local “culture” and asked the wife at the end of this section:

H: Had you tried green Chinese onion before?
N: No.
H: (But) last night when we had our first dinner together, I saw you took a green onion and ate it with (salty) sauce. You already got used to it (the taste), didn’t you?
N: Yep.

Adapting to ‘Chinese’ life

As what we have seen in the last section, the new life of the wife in the village was strange and hard to get used to. Beside a lot of inconveniences, the wife has found another new “cultural” element that she’s never seen before, and this time it triggered a conflict between the mother-in-law and her:

H: Did you use a laundry machine to do laundry at first?

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2 A “kang” is a brick bed which can be warmed by a fire in the pipe underneath.
N: … I couldn’t find the place, (and wondered) how I could wash the stuff without a container. Then I found a big black thing in the kitchen, and there was a fireplace underneath. I thought this must be the place people boil water and do laundry. So I made the fire, boiled some water and started to do my laundry. At this moment, my mother-in-law came in and saw me. I didn’t understand what she said, (she just) kept blah-blah-blahing (loudly). I was wondering, “Old lady, I don’t understand what the hell you are talking about.” I just kept washing.
H: What was your mother-in-law’s impression on her face?
N: Unhappy, very unhappy; she just kept blah-blah-blahing and left to find Zhonggang.
H: (She went to) look for the interpreter.
N: (Imitating her mother-in-law) “Zhonggang, you go to see WHAT your wife is doing! In the WOK, she is doing laundry in the WOK! Oh, my goodness!”
Then there he (Zhonggang) came, and said, “Nunè,” – he didn’t dare to yell at me, because he knew that I didn’t know anything – “Nunè, what are you doing?”
I said, “Doing laundry.”
“Nunè, this is not the laundry place; it’s for cooking.”
I said, “Oh my! (We use) such a big thing to make food for two!”

The whole story was told by the wife in a very dramatic way: the wife did the laundry in the wok which is used for cooking; her mother-in-law has seen it, but due to the language barrier, the two couldn’t communicate. By vividly impersonating her mother-in-law, the wife presents an image of an old wicked village woman, who obviously was unhappy with her or even didn’t like her; and the wife was again presented as a stranger who was peculiar. The husband was standing in the middle of his mother and wife, acting as a mediator, and trying to solve the dilemma delicately without hurting anyone.

The four narratives above have shown how the couple’s story was constructed. At the same time, it is important to note that the tone of the show through what the presenter has to say is quite ironical and humorous at times: e.g. tell us what kind of daughter-in-law you expect/I want a family-oriented and hard-working one/I guess an ox would be competent enough! – Gentlemen please listen to me now: for those of you who are still single, if you want to win a beauty, you’ve got to wear little! – about flies: these are pets we keep in toilets in China... The presenter’s humor has made the audience excited and set a lively tone of the show on the one hand; and on the other hand, this way of presenting was also helpful to make the couple’s story more dramatic and “funny” (in the two meanings of the adjective: humorous and strange/bizarre).

4.2. Multi-faceted differentialization

Forcing people into boxes
Typical self-otherising

At the beginning of the show, after asking the live audience what kind of spouse they expected, the host asked the wife the same question as the start of the talk with her. When asking this question, the host added the condition “in your home country”, and thus, drew the line between “us” and the “Other” straight away. This question was asked from a culturalist view with a potential assumption that the expectation of a spouse is different in Armenia than in China (Abdallah-Pretceille, 2003).

H: First of all, please tell us what kind of spouse do people expect in your home country?
N: The most handsome, blue-eyed, and rich (men).
H: So when you were younger, your future husband in your dream should be tall, handsome and rich; a man who fits each and all requirements above, is it correct?
N: Yes.
H: What do you think are the differences between Armenian men and Chinese men?
N: Armenian men are just handsome, white-skinned, and blue-eyed with blond hair; and our Chinese men have yellow skin, dark eyes and – small noses.
H: But you still came to China after all.

When the wife answered the question, she systematically described the appearance of Armenian men: “The most handsome, blue-eyed”. Then the host kept pushing her to describe “the differences between Armenian men and Chinese men”; and the answer was still a description of ethnic differences: “Armenian men are just handsome, white-skinned, and blue-eyed with blond hair; and our Chinese men have yellow skin, dark eyes and – small noses”. The boundary between “us” and the “Other” was clearly made between Armenians and Chinese, though the wife has used “our Chinese men” to indicate her “double identities” of being both the Armenian “Other” and the wife of a Chinese man, one of the many presented “selves” during the show.

Though people in her country want to find a “handsome and rich man” – the previous questions were meant to lead to the next sentence – “But you still came to China after all”. The sort of “conclusion” seems to give a hint to the audience about the husband – who is he, what is he like, and why, etc. At the same time, we should note that the question about the expectation of the spouse was only asked to the wife but not to the husband. One reason might be that the audience is always curious about the different “Other”; and another reason, perhaps, it’s really because of what the show has introduced in the very first preview: “no one has expected that he should have brought back a blonde foreign wife…”.

After introducing the many inconveniences of the wife’s life in the village, section 6 “the Foreign daughter-in-law came to the village” ended with the first highlight of the show, a “tempest” in the village. The story occurred when the wife
arrived in the village. She kissed her husband in public and was seen by her mother-in-law and the neighbors. It might be important to note here that the wife was probably being watched all the time when she just arrived to the village, like a new animal in the zoo, people did show much curiosity about her.

H: I’ve heard about a very interesting thing: once you and your husband were kissing in public, and it even caused a “tempest” in the village. Is it real?
N: The first time my mother-in-law saw it (us kissing), she said, “oh, my good lord!” Because it is OK for us in my country: Dad kisses me, I kiss Him; Mom kisses me… just like this; it is all fine for relatives and friends to kiss each other.
H: But in our village?
N: Oh, my goodness. Then the next time I kissed him, it was seen by my neighbor; the neighbor saw it, (therefore) the entire village knew it.
H: How did people react on this?
N: (People) said this foreigner was too open.
H: This foreigner is too open …

Then this behavior of kissing-in-public seemed to confirm the stereotypical image of what local people had about foreigners in represented discourses that they are “too open”, a confirmation of the “well-known” difference between “us” and the “Other”. However, the wife thought this was normal as “it is OK for us in my country”. No matter what the villagers thought, the wife used this as a “cultural alibi” and self-otherising to explain and somehow defend (Philips, 2010: 86) herself in a new environment.

Otherising the wife, the ‘Other’

The wife kissing her husband in public has brought a “tempest” in the village, and her kissing another man has caused a family crisis, and brought another highlight of the show.

H: I’ve heard once you saw Nunè kissing a foreigner yourself, did you?
D: I did.
H: You DID see her kissing with a Russian sailor?
D: Yes…

H: … Did you, did you really kiss the Russian sailor?
N: Actually it wasn’t that serious, if you say like that, how people would think (about me)? In Rongcheng City, there’s only one café opened by their fellow; they came to my café before they went to work and after they landed. Everyone who came hugged me and kissed me.
N: I didn’t have any other solutions. “Don’t touch me! Don’t touch me!” If I do so, no one will come! How am I going to do my business then?
H: But it can’t be like that, either. “Come in! Come in! Anyone who enters my
door can kiss me!”
N: I was not, I was not like this. They just felt close to me when they saw me.
H: I see, I see, *this is the national habit.*
N: Yes! Yes! Yes!

After listening to the wife’s explanation, the host said that he understood “this is the national habit” of the wife. Though this looks like he was giving her an alibi, his answer has shown that subconsciously, he still saw the wife as a foreigner, as the “Other”.

When the wife heard the alibi the host gave to her, she immediately agreed on it by saying “Yes! Yes! Yes!”, as if her “culture” was just suitable to explain everything here (Philips, 2010: 63 & 65).

“The kissing incident” was in section 10, which was introduced right after section 9 “I should do something”. The purpose of telling the story was not only trying to otherise the wife, but also a way of rendering the story more dramatic when the wife started to get used to the local life and the story has “normalized”.

H: … (To Deng) What did other villagers say when you just brought Nunè home?
Deng (D): *The neighbors were so surprised when Nunè just came here. They touched her hair to check if it was real blond; (Nunè’s) skin was white, and (people said that) she looked like a doll.*
H: The important thing is, what did your friends form your childhood say?
D: They were so regretful that they had married too early…
H: Did you tell them the (“successful”) experience?
D: I’d remain it a secret.
H: People do admire you, right?
H: Yes, they do.
H: Were there a lot of people watching you (couple)?
D: Very many.
H: What did the fellow senior villagers say?
D: *They admired me, yet were a bit worried about me; they were afraid that she (Nunè) might not know how to live well (at here).*
H: They were afraid that she might run away after a few days?
D: It seemed like that.
H: How did your parents react?
D: *(They were) happy for me in the first place, and a bit worried at the same time.*
H: What did they tell you?
D: *They said that my wife came from a big city, they wonder if she could get used to our life here. They asked me to treat her nicely.*
H: Then you could tell them, “No problem, I’m sure she will stay as long as I cook everyday.”…

When the husband brought his wife back to the village, people were curious about the
stranger. Again, like watching a new animal in the zoo, they “were so surprised … They touched her hair to check if it was real blond; (Nunè’s) skin was white, and (people said that) she looked like a doll”. People did admire the husband and were happy for him, since in their eyes he has got a beautiful wife; however, they – the villager and the husband’s parents – also worried about the husband, since the wife is different from them and might not stay long in the village. They thought she’s a different one not only because she’s a foreigner, but also because she’s from a city not a village like theirs. In other words, they worried because they thought the wife didn’t “belong” here. The clear boundary in mind between the locals and the “Other” has set some sort of intangible barrier between them.

**East-West cooperation: otherising the children**

What the show seems to be doing is to suggest that the wife and the husband were set to be a combination of two “cultures”. Their twin daughters are clearly labeled in this sense; they are presented as “East-West cooperation” in what follows:

H: Let’s have a look at the next generation of “East-West cooperation”, shall we?  
N: Sure…  
H: I bet you know how to speak the Weihai dialect, right? … Would you mind saying hi to us in Weihai dialect? …  
H: How (do you think) your classmate think about you? OK, let me put my question in this way: do you two know how beautiful you are?  
H: … Do you know how to speak Armenian? … Could you please say something in Armenian? …  
H: … Have you tried dumplings before?  
Guest’s daughter(s) GD: Sure.  
H: You eat dumplings every New Year, don’t you?  
GD: That’s right.  
H: And you eat them with forks and knives, don’t you?  
GD: No, we don’t.  
H: With chopsticks?  
GD: Yep.

The host started to draw the audience’s attention to the appearance of the twins by telling them to “have a look at” them. During the talk with the twin daughters, the host spent most of the time asking questions concerning their language differences and their appearance. At the same time, through the images of the dumplings and chopsticks again (last time used when the husband tried to get permission to marry the wife), the twins become the representatives of “Chineseness”.  

Though the twins were called “East-West cooperation”, they were still presented to be “foreign” in the show. The questions asked by the host were rather like multiple choices for the twin. They needed to choose between speaking “Weihai dialect” or “Armenian” language, knowing they “look beautiful (different from other
kids)” or not, “tried dumpling before” or not, and “using forks and knives” or “chopsticks”. It seemed that the choices of being “foreign” were a bit more than those of being Chinese, as the host asked some of the questions already with his own assumption: for instance, he asked if the twin had ate dumplings with forks and knives, as they were supposed to.

4.3. Unstable identification?

During the show, the couple and their kids were introduced several times. Though the description of them remained the same, the terms which were used to define the wife changed at times when she was introduced by the show/host. Her identification is in a way unstable as is shown in the following table:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Identification</th>
<th>The wife (Nunè)</th>
<th>The kids</th>
<th>The couple</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>By the show:</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- A blondie</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>- A blond foreign wife (appeared twice)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>- A foreign wife</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>- The foreign wife (appeared twice)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Foreign daughter-in-law</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Our foreign daughter-in-law of Rongcheng City</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- A Chinese foreign wife</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Chinese wife (appeared twice)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>By herself:</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Our Rongcheng wives</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- My fellow countrymen in Shidao…</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Our Chinese men…</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>- “I MUST come back, because I married Chinese, my home is in China.”</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>By the neighbors:</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- The foreigner (is too open).</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>By the show:</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Beautiful twin daughters</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- “East-West cooperative” twin daughters</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>- A lovely twin</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>By the audience:</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- “Now their family is happy and affluent…”</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>By the show:</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- An international marriage, a well-known love story, a refraction of the huge changes of Chinese countries.</td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In the show, the wife was called “the foreigner” by her neighbors, but to herself, she’s one of “us”: she belonged to “our Rongcheng wives”, she lived together with her “fellow countrymen in Shidao”, she has a husband as one of “our Chinese men”, and she “MUST come back, because” she’s “married Chinese”, her “home is in China”. We might hypothesize another possible reason of why the wife had such a strong and absolute tone in her identification to China. As was introduced in the show
discourse, the couple’s story “started to become reported by many media in the
country”: the wife might have already learnt how to deal with the media and even
how to please her audience by playing “funny games” with her identities.

During the show, the identification of the wife was changing at times, and a
list of different “titles” was addressed to the wife. During the show, she has changed
from “a blondie”, “a blond foreign wife”, “a foreign wife”, “the foreign wife”, to
“foreign daughter-in-law”, “our foreign daughter-in-law of Rongcheng City”, “a
Chinese foreign wife”, and finally to “a Chinese wife”. The wife had slowly followed
this flow to become “Chinese”, as the show intended to present her process of
“acculturation” and “assimilation”. However, she was called “a Chinese foreign wife”
at the end – maybe she was still seen a bit different from the ‘real’ Chinese wives no
matter how “Chinese” she thought or said herself was, since one’s identity is not
always what one thinks one is but is interdependent with one’s identity-for-others
(Laing, 1961: 86).

To finish the analysis, we reproduce one example of how the wife has
presented herself as “a Chinese wife”:

H: ... Speaking of air conditioner, I’ve also heard that you asked for “giveaways”
when you bought it. Is it true?
N: The air conditioner cost much. I just asked the manager “Shouldn’t I get some
bonus for buying such an expensive thing?” …
N: He said no. I said it couldn’t be true. I’ve always wanted to make coffee and
wanted to buy one (a coffee coiler) to boil water…
N: I said, “Could you please give me one for free?”
H: Did the manager give you?
N: He did.
H: You really are good at bargain.
N: I’ve learned this from our Rongcheng wives.
H: You really are economical, Nune!

5. Conclusion

In this article we were interested in analyzing the construction of intercultural
couplehood on the basis of a Chinese TV show which presented the story of a
Sino-Armenian couple, established in China. The most important finding is based on
the fact that the programme was built on a narrative structure which had many
resemblances with a typical fairy tale. The fact that W. Labov’s model of narrative
structure (1997) fitted the way the show was organized is significant in this sense.

Like many other similar global media fairy tales (Silverstone & Lunt, 2001), the
show tried to tell the story of a “propertyless and wordless” village young man who
“won” his foreign “blonde beauty”, and then had a “happily ever after” family. Like
other fairy tales, the village young man and his beauty have also experienced many
difficulties to “achieve” the happy ending, only the difficulties here don’t refer to
firedragons but to the so-called “cultural differences” and the barriers of the self and
the Other they bring about. By emphasizing cultural, ethnic, and linguistic differences, the show and the protagonists (especially the wife) adopted a fully culturalist way to construct the ‘plot’. Certainly, for the purpose of audience rating, the television program followed this “global common sense” of understanding intercultural couplehood (Piller, 2007; Dervin, 2011) to satisfy its TV audience, who probably wished for such constructed stories of the Self and the Other.

Regardless of culturalist discourses that cross the show, we have also demonstrated that identification is unstable as far as the wife is concerned. This is related mostly to the TV presenter’s own words and insistence on essentialising her. In the end, she is neither Chinese nor Armenian but a “Chinese foreign wife” – in-between. But this is what identity and interculturality are about: when asked to position oneself in relation to nationalities, sense of belonging, etc. answers cannot be contextual and thus contradictory. When the twins are introduced in the show, this in-betweeness is more balanced in the sense that the TV presenter doesn’t succeed in having them position themselves between the two spaces (East-West) that the show asserts characterize them, in other words, they are the only ones who don’t seem to play the identification game that characterizes this fairy tale.
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